

---

The Introduction of the  
Study of Music  
into the Public Schools  
of America.



By James C. Johnson.

---



THE INTRODUCTION

OF THE

# STUDY OF MUSIC

INTO THE

PUBLIC SCHOOLS OF AMERICA

---

BY

JAMES C. JOHNSON

1893

---

CHICAGO,  
KINDERGARTEN LITERATURE CO.,  
WOMAN'S TEMPLE.

Columbia, thou strong land! Columbia, thou song-land!  
Awake to thy greatness; rejoice in this day!  
Unsealed are the lips that were dumb in the morning,  
The noontide is on thee; awake the glad lay.  
Sing praise to the Giver! sing joy to the nation!  
Sing, sing on our way to that future so bright.  
No one dare foretell it; the years shall reveal it—  
This kingdom of music, of joy, and of light!

—*James C. Johnson.*

## HISTORY OF THE INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY OF MUSIC INTO THE COMMON SCHOOLS OF AMERICA.

About the year 1832 (the exact date cannot here be given) the Boston public was electrified by the announcement of a concert, by a juvenile choir of two hundred members, under the charge of Lowell Mason. At the present time it is hard to realize the then prevalent belief about singing,—that it was a gift confined to a certain limited number of people. Others, who had no “musical ear,” could not learn. Lowell Mason was the apostle of a new dispensation, holding that everyone who could talk could sing. The writer attended the concert. He beheld the galleries of the Bowdoin-street church entirely filled with happy girls and boys. Lowell Mason was at the organ. Dr. Lyman Beecher and a great body of influential ladies and gentlemen were in the pulpit and the pews. The singing was heavenly,—such as had never before been heard in America. The occasion is worth noting, as the first public event that gave the impulse to a new departure in the study of song.

The choir whose public effort was so successful met for rehearsal in the underground vestry of Bowdoin-street church, which place may be regarded as the birthplace of American popular musical instruction. The choir consisted of a large number of girls and twenty to thirty boys. A large proportion of its members in after years became music teachers or noted singers. Lowell

Mason, in his inimitable way, taught us the elements of music, and wrote on the blackboard the exercises, which are substantially the same as those now used in schools.

We gave various public performances: one in the old Brattle-street church and one in old Trinity church. The choir is thus described, as it gained the favor of the public, and made possible the introduction of the new branch of instruction into the school curriculum.

The exact date of the first music lesson in the public schools cannot be given. The writer's impression is that the experiment was tried in one or two schools and then extended to the others. Probably lessons had already been given in Alcott's Mt. Vernon School and in the Chauncy Hall School, both private institutions. In 1842 the system was in full operation, under the superintendence of Lowell Mason. A. M. Johnson, Geo. F. Root, Albert Denke, and the writer were Boston public school music teachers.

One or two lessons per week were given. The school's master was always present, to preserve order. Usually about two hundred, including the older scholars of each school, received the lesson. As the pupils were of different ages and belonged to different classes, and as there was no study of music between lessons, it may well be believed that the teacher's task was a difficult one. Lowell Mason, however, was fully competent, and his followers imitated him to the best of their ability.

A lesson program was as follows: (1) Scale singing, in all sorts of measure, beating time; (2) Blackboard lesson on the elements, which were gone through with once a year; (3) Blackboard exercises in note reading, including simple songs. About mid-year came the formidable transposition of the scale. There were also drill in song singing, and singing of hymn tunes. As during an average school life a pupil went through this

course three or four times, the teaching was reasonably thorough.

Under the auspices of the Boston Academy there were assembled in those days great musical conventions, attended by large numbers of music teachers and choir leaders from all parts of the country. These people, whose thundering choruses will long be remembered, carried back to their own regions Boston notions about music, and among the other notions that of music in schools.

A movement of the greatest value to musical progress was the immense increase in the number of teachers in the schools who could sing. The visiting music teacher was no longer the sole dependence. He now could set the music lesson, which was, like a geography or arithmetic lesson, to be studied daily and recited weekly or fortnightly to the music teacher. It became possible to extend the area of musical study to the lower grammar and primary grades. In 1850 music had become a common branch of study in many cities and large towns. In smaller places there was delay.

Allusion has been made to the "Juvenile Choir of the Boston Academy of Music." This continued its good work, continually winning friends to the cause, and raising up active young singers and teachers, until, in 1842, it came under the care of the writer, and in "Anniversary Week" of that year gave its annual concert, for the benefit of the throng of ministers who attended the religious meetings of that week. The concert was in the form of a May festival, and the stage of the Odeum (then under the control of the "Academy") was decorated with flowers, festoons, statuary, etc. It is believed that this was the first, and the origin of all the cantata concerts, and from similar exhibitions in ensuing years, under the same leadership, came the harvest concerts common to

schools and Sunday schools, and the school and Sunday-school Christmas festivals. Similar classes in towns and cities, in connection with some free music teaching in schools, aided or resulted in the introduction of regular musical instruction.

It remains to speak of some peculiar obstacles that were in the way of the new movement in musical instruction. It was to be expected that want of time and want of money would be pleaded, and it was not surprising that head masters were not zealous for the addition of a new branch of study, with increased care for teachers. The strange thing was, that there was a prevalent feeling among men and boys that singing was womanish, or girlish, and boys were ashamed to sing. It required many years of effort to overcome this nonsensical feeling.

Now, thank God, the victory is accomplished, and voiceless Columbia has become a land of song!

JAMES C. JOHNSON.

Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2017 with funding from

This project is made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Office of Commonwealth Libraries





